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BY THE AUTHOR OF "MY DEAREST HEART."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Like the parent of a dream this act in my  
 life passed away, and I thought its drama  
 ended. Only ten months before I had first  
 seen the moonlight on St. Gabriel's Grange.  
 I had in that short time owned and resigned  
 an estate, I had won and lost a good man's  
 love, and my heart was nigh to breaking.  
 But for that sore and wounded heart, it  
 might have seemed, as in my quiet little  
 home in Clonsiderham, the memories of the  
 past year came back to me, that I had lived  
 a brief passionate existence in some other  
 sphere, and had now to take up the threads  
 of ordinary life.

There had been many mistakes; I had  
 quarrelled with my lover; I could not take  
 what was not justly mine. To explain further  
 was impossible without implicating  
 Gwendoline, and that I would not do. My  
 father let a sigh escape as he thought of the  
 wealth I might have had, but he said little;  
 he knew I had no right to it, and he would  
 have given up double the fortune for right's  
 sake. He was too kind to cross-examine  
 closely; there was a puzzled expression in  
 the thoughtful eyes that rested on my face,  
 but he only said—

"You did well, my child. You could not  
 use a penny of Mr. Gascoigne's money."  
 My mother and sisters thought more of  
 Gilbert, and grieved more that I was parted  
 from one I loved and who had loved me  
 than for the Grange. I think my mother  
 hoped the misunderstanding would be swept  
 away one day; but she did not know how it  
 came about. For me, I could see no hope,  
 no possible dawn.

I was very glad, and for a while I sank into  
 a dull and listless state. I thought I would  
 endure all my life after. I grew ill at last,  
 and the doctor said I should have what doctors  
 regard as the pueraria for so many  
 vague diseases—change of air.

So I made an effort to arouse myself, and  
 saw how selfish and miserable was the life  
 I was leading.

"It will be much better for me to be at  
 work," I said.

"I wish I understood it all," my mother  
 replied. "I think you might tell everything  
 frankly to us, dear. We might think of  
 some way in which your trouble could be  
 cleared up."

I shook my head. I could not tell them  
 Gwendoline Fenroy's secret; it would do  
 me no good.

"No, it can never be explained," I said.  
 "If only Gilbert would come back to the  
 Grange, so that I might know he was not  
 suffering for what I have done! And his return  
 would take me from a false position I ought  
 never to have been placed in."

My parents thought Gilbert was angry be-  
 cause St. Gabriel's Grange had been left to  
 me, and they could not advise me what to  
 do. They must have wished sometimes I  
 was really and truly mistress of the property  
 so strangely bequeathed. I did not think  
 then how helpless and perplexed they must  
 be, and how good they were to withhold the  
 painful questions and the searching for  
 every nail in the chain which would have  
 been natural enough, but in my low and  
 nervous condition would have tortured me.

"I don't think you are fit to go away  
 again, Viola," my sister Barbara said. "You  
 had better let me try this time; you need  
 rest."

But I knew occupation was the best medi-  
 cine I could have; so I took a situation as  
 governess to two little boys in a town in a  
 distant part of England, where there was  
 nothing to recall the Grange to my mind or  
 Gilbert's Grange to my heart.

But just before I went I needs must take  
 one more look at my last home. It was to  
 be my last, to remain with me all my life  
 after with the thought of the past and of  
 what might have been. In my black dress  
 and mantle, with a thick veil over my face,  
 I knew I should hardly be recognized, and I  
 even ventured to accept from a friendly  
 farmer, whose name and face were strange  
 to me, a lift about the familiar road from  
 Northby to Marlands. The snow was on  
 the ground, although it was March, and the  
 wind was cold and piercing; but there was  
 one gleam of sunlight on the lake as sud-  
 denly I saw it through the pine-trees; and I  
 held my breath with a gasp, and a great sob  
 rose up in my throat.

The man pointed out the Grange to me.  
 It was the great house of the village, and  
 every one was proud of it.

"Perhaps you are a stranger in these  
 parts," he said. "You're our Grange—Squire's  
 house, it's empty now, barring the servants.  
 Old Squire he died, and there's all kind of  
 stories, whispeers like, going about. Some  
 say he left it to a young lady as was there,  
 and was to have been married to his neph-  
 ew, and then jilted him; some that they are  
 going to be married after a bit, and there's  
 nothing to talk about at all. I am new to  
 Marlands myself. I used to live at Bratton,  
 ten miles away. You know Bratton?"

"No."

"Don't you now? That's queer! Well,  
 such is what some folks say. There's others,  
 again, will tell you Mr. Gascoigne—that's  
 Squire—left his money to Mr. Gilbert—that's  
 his nephew—on condition he did not marry  
 this young lady. Any way, none knows the  
 rights of it; but Mr. Gilbert's way, and the  
 young lady left the Grange, looking the way  
 men say, as if her heart would break. It's  
 a pity they don't make up their minds for  
 one at any rate to live there. It's a nice  
 place—first-class land some of it."

He looked with a certain pride at the  
 looming pile of gray stone, the broken sky-  
 line of tower and gables, and the windows  
 sparkling through the haze in the sunbeams  
 that shone on them; and I gazed at it with  
 throbbing, aching heart, drinking in all its  
 beauty—my fair palace, my joy and my sor-  
 row—mine, though I should not set foot in  
 it again—mine, though I stole near it in  
 secrecy, and looked on it as an exile and a  
 wanderer.

I walked up the little lane, St. Gabriel's  
 Walk, and by the shore of the calm quiet  
 lake. Everything was very still; no one  
 was about, and the twitter of a linnet from  
 its perch on the twig of an ash-tree was the  
 only sound near me. The trees, which ought  
 to have been full of bud and promises of  
 summer, were frost-bound, and a great  
 stretch of snow-covered park-land, with  
 dark hedges and plantations of shrubs and  
 evergreens, lay between me and the Grange.  
 Then I came to the low stone wall and the  
 gate where Gilbert and I used to meet and  
 part. The lichens were lightly hidden in  
 snow, but here and there an ivy-leaf peeped  
 out green and unfading from the gray and  
 white.

I stood there in silence, and prayed Heaven  
 that Gilbert at least might be happy,  
 whatever was to be my lot; and I plucked  
 gently one green ivy-leaf as a memento.

And on the still air there seemed to come  
 from the pine-trees the fragment of a song—  
 "What'er may be, where'er thou art,  
 Dear love, I love thee evermore."  
 Only a whisper, a whisper.

Tender and soft, loving and sweet,  
 Only a whisper, a whisper  
 From months after that nothing altered the  
 quiet current of my life, and I thought nothing  
 ever would do so again. I had given up  
 expectation and I imagined hope was dead.

My duties required all my attention; I had  
 no time to repine or moan. It was better so.

I heard of Hilda's marriage with Lord  
 Ormsby, one of the fashionable matches of  
 the season; and I had many letters from  
 Annie. I suppose she guessed gradually  
 what had happened; but she betrayed it  
 only by an extra loving tenderness in her  
 letters.

She knew the separation between Gilbert  
 and me was final, and I knew she was long-  
 ing to reunite us. When she was Ulrich's  
 wife, she begged me to go and stay with her  
 at Marlands, and she told me how every-  
 thing looked, and what was changed. In  
 one note she at length spoke of Gilbert's  
 absence and its cause.

"Gilbert will never come to the Grange,  
 but he would be happier if you were there,  
 Viola. He says he would return at once to  
 England then. It is yours, you know."

At the bottom of that same letter was  
 scribbled a careless postscript—  
 "You remember Mr. Cardon, who used to  
 be Gilbert's partner? Have you heard about  
 him? He has appropriated a lot of money  
 given him by a client to invest, and made  
 off to America or somewhere, no one knows  
 where, three months ago. Some people say  
 that that Frenchwoman, who was Gwendoline's  
 maid, and whom Gwendoline disapproved so  
 harshly, went with him; but that is too ridicu-  
 lous, isn't it? You never know what vil-  
 lance-folk will say."

I heard too from Gwendoline. Her letters  
 were full of her husband. I say that she  
 was learning more day by day of the worth  
 of the love she had so often flung away for  
 ever. I liked to think of her, changed as  
 she was from the bitter passionate woman  
 of two years before to a happy loving wife.  
 I dwelt on her happiness as the best panacea  
 for my own woe. I had been able so to alter  
 my own mind, I thought not to fret at  
 my own lot. The separation of Gilbert  
 and me was nothing compared with the case  
 of Martin Fenroy and his wife. So I lingered  
 over Gwendoline's letters and over  
 each word in them that breathed of happi-  
 ness, and perhaps exaggerated that happi-  
 ness to my self, seeing that it was what I  
 wished; but even then I was conscious they  
 were not all I had hoped. Still there was a  
 restless unrest, still a shadow seemed to  
 be between her and Martin; she appeared  
 to be aware of it, and to be trying to argue  
 it away by telling me she was at peace. She  
 bargued on what had happened more than  
 was natural; it was as if the ghost of the  
 past haunted her path and would not let her  
 rest.

I tried to think myself mistaken, to think  
 my own morbid fancy imparted this mean-  
 ing to her words; but the more I pondered  
 them the clearer was this undercurrent re-  
 vealed, and then the seal seemed affixed to  
 my own sorrow, and the world around me  
 was dark indeed.

Was this to be the end? Had I done no  
 good? Had I not at least made Gwendoline  
 happy? For all that Gilbert and I were suf-  
 fering, was there to be no compensation in  
 the life of Martin and his wife?

Could Crawford Cardon have sought her  
 out even in far India? Some thought could  
 not be!

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Miss Thorne, Miss Thorne, here is a let-  
 ter for you from India!"

I was hoping so, and my foot hit the  
 book at the old Grange as I stood by the  
 window of the schoolroom, waiting for my  
 pupils to come to breakfast. There was a  
 tree in the garden just outside the window  
 which reminded me just a little of one near  
 the lake at Marlands, and the boy's mar-  
 velled why I cared for that old married ash.

Ernie, the eldest, came rushing into the  
 apartment impulsively from the dining-  
 room, where the post-bag had been opened.

"Here, Miss Thorne—you like to get let-  
 ters from your friend in India; don't you?  
 I think I'll go to India when I'm a man. It's  
 a jolly big place, and you've only to sit and  
 be punked, and let the blackies do every-  
 thing, and go out there doosting when you  
 like. I think I would do that every day,  
 and kill frightfully big ones, and mamma  
 would put the skins on the drawing-room  
 floor, and say, 'My son in India shot that  
 fellow!'"

I took the envelope from him, but I only  
 looked at the slender hand-writing I knew  
 so well, and waited until the meal was over,  
 the children sent out for half an hour's play,  
 and I was alone before opening the cover. I  
 could not read Gwendoline's letters in the  
 midst of their merry chatter and distracted  
 by their demands.

The letter began in a sudden impetuous  
 way, as if she were speaking, but it held me  
 spell-bound from first to last.

"Viola, how you must hate me! How can  
 you bear to think of me, to write to me?  
 Why don't you poison the dear kind letters  
 you send me, and tell me how you defied my  
 name? Viola, Viola, I never knew what  
 I had done—I never dreamed!"

Of what was she dreaming now?

"I thought only of myself, and what you  
 had done for me, never of what return your  
 kindness might have brought to you. Oh,  
 how could you still be silent and let me  
 escape? How could you let me be more  
 than I hate myself and condemn the  
 weak fool I once was! My dear friend and  
 sister, I don't know how to write to you or  
 what to say."

The writing was all unsteady and shaken,  
 and the marks of tears were on the page.  
 Dear, noble, impulsive Gwendoline? What  
 would I not do to help her?

"I have learned all the story," she went  
 on. What story?

"Gilbert is here."  
 My heart beat fiercely. What did she  
 mean? He knew nothing to tell her.

"He has been wandering about the earth,  
 and he came here at last to us and asked if  
 Martin could get him an appointment. So I  
 heard the truth; you and he are parted for  
 ever! He would not tell me why, though I  
 urged him to give me an explanation. I  
 think there must have been a dark shadow  
 of suspicion, a great terrible fear looming  
 in my brain. Still he held out, and would  
 say nothing—nothing—till he fell ill of fever  
 a few days afterwards; and he was weak,  
 and thought he should not live. Then he  
 told me—me alone—as I knelt by his side.

"I want you to tell her," he said, "if any-  
 thing should happen to me, that I forgive her,  
 and that I do not believe what they said  
 to me, but only what I myself knew. I  
 believe she cared for me before Crawford  
 Cardon made use of the time my mother af-  
 fected him to entrap her heart. I believe  
 she would have come and she did not love  
 me at first; but that will silence her. She  
 thought to marry me for pity, and she re-  
 turned his letters to Cardon—I saw it done  
 —and she would have tried to keep me  
 deceived and been true to me—in a way. I  
 was angry, madly angry; but when I came  
 to think of her, her sweetness and her frank  
 bright eyes, I saw this must be the answer.  
 I left her; it was all I could do. I hated the  
 Grange and the money, and I hated Cardon;  
 but I could not hate her. There was no  
 truth in what Hilda said—that Viola was  
 marrying me to stop legal action and secure  
 the Grange, while she loved and always had  
 loved Cardon. Tell Hilda from me that she  
 was wrong!"

"Viola, what do you think I could say or  
 do? I was turned to ice. I could not move.  
 He spoke so earnestly, pleading and ex-  
 plaining, and I was dumb. I saw it all in a  
 moment's flash; that scorching and burnt  
 me. I thought my sin buried and forgotten,  
 and I shot out in flame before my eyes. I  
 fancied no harm had been done. I had been  
 stopped in time, and was safe; and I forgave  
 you. Viola, you are a woman, what is it to  
 you?"

(To be continued.)

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